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COMMENTS ON MIKE BURTON'S THESES

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Over the past twenty five years there have been a number of attempts to seek a reconciliation or accommodation between Skinner's radical behaviourism and other major philosophical and ideological movements of this century. There is a series of papers beginning with Gasking (1960) followed by Day (1969b), Waller (1977) and Costall (1980), which have explored the relationship between Skinner's thought and that of Wittgenstein, and there is a similar series of papers beginning with the Proceedings of the 1963 Rice Symposium (Wann 1964) followed by Kvale and Grenness (1967), Day (1969a), Corriveau (1972) and Giorgi (1975) which have explored the relationship between Skinner's behaviourism and the phenomenological tradition in philosophy from Husserl to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Skinner himself has discussed the relationship between his own position and that of Freud (Skinner 1953; 1959, Evans 1968) and Nye (1975) has related Skinner to both Freud and Rogers. Now we are offered the outline of a similar treatment of the relationship between Skinner's position and that of Marx and Marxism.

I do not propose to comment on Mark Burton's introduction to his ten theses, except to point out that the terms 'materialism' and 'consciousness' are being used in their Marxist sense which is significantly different from the sense in which those terms are commonly used in psychology and in philosophical discussions of the mind-body problem. Burton uses 'Materialism' in the sense of Marx's 'Historical Materialism', the doctrine that the changes in the processes involved in production, i.e. the conversion of matter for purposes of human use and consumption, are the primary determinants of changes both in the patterns of human social interaction and in the associated patterns of ideological thinking; whereas in Metaphysics Materialism is the doctrine that everything that exists is either a material substance or entity, some part aspect or property of such an entity or some relation between two or more such entities or their parts or features; while in the context of the Mind-Body problem Materialism is the doctrine which holds that mental states and processes are physical states and processes within the brain of the individual concerned. Similarly 'consciousness' within the Marxist tradition is used to refer to the body of gradually changing beliefs about the way things both are and ought to be in the world which are shared by and control social interaction between members of a human community and members of sub-groups within the wider community. Although the term 'consciousness' is sometimes used in this Marxist sense in the context of social psychology, the term 'consciousness', as understood by psychologists of the introspective or structural school during the late 19th and early 20th century as it is used in my own paper on the subject (Place 1956) in which I defend the view that it is a process in the brain, was taken to refer to those private states and processes whose existence or occurrence within the individual is directly accessible to their owner through the activity of self-observation or introspection. Consciousness in this sense is usually held to comprise (1) the activity of selective attention to sensory input (2) the resulting sensations, (3) the interpretation or categorization of those sensations as an encounter with some object, event or state of affairs in environment (i.e. perception), (4) the emotional response both to the uninterpreted sensation, as in the case of so-called physical or sensuous pleasure and the distress produced by physical pain, and to the interpretation of these and other experiences in terms of their wider significance for the individual, together with the associated activities of (5) imagining and (6) thinking. Consciousness in this sense is, of course, always involved in the acquisition, confirmation and disconfirmation of an individual's beliefs and hence in the determination of Consciousness in the Marxist sense of the term; but when Marx speaks of the determination of Consciousness by economic factors he is talking about the effect of such factors on beliefs shared by and communicated from one person to another within the verbal community, rather than about the central information processing and decision-making system within the individual brain which is what Consciousness amounts to, as the term is traditionally used by psychologists and philosophers of mind.

In establishing a link between Skinner's radical behaviourism and Marxist theory, Burton, quite correctly in my view, seizes on the key role played by the concept of the verbal community in the account of language given by Skinner in his book *Verbal Behavior*. But although every one of his ten theses relate

to the verbal community, he makes no attempt to offer a definition of the term 'verbal community' without which it is impossible, so it seems to me, to evaluate the claims he makes about it. I, therefore, propose to begin my examination of his theses by offering a definition of the verbal operant which connects it to the notion of a discriminative stimulus and the related notion of 'a contingency' on the one hand and the notion of 'the verbal community' on the other followed by a definition of the term 'verbal community' itself.

In a recent paper (Place 1982) in which I tried to suggest some improvements in the account of language offered by Skinner in *Verbal Behavior*, I defined an effective verbal operant as

a sentence uttered or, to use Skinner's term, emitted by one individual (the speaker) which either as a whole, or more commonly, when its constituent words and phrases have occurred as parts of other sentences, have been distinctively associated in the experience of another individual, the listener, with a particular contingency for which it consequently acts or is capable of acting as a discriminative stimulus; where any sentence utterance of the same configuration has been or is capable of being acquired as a discriminative stimulus with respect to the same contingency or type of contingency by any member of the verbal community (consisting of speakers of the same natural language) to which both speaker and listener belong.

The verbal community, in the sense in which the term is used for the purposes of the above definition, is the social group constituted either by all speakers of the natural language or by the members of some subgroup of the verbal community in this wider sense who share a mutually intelligible code or dialect of the natural language of which the dialect or code in question is a sub-variety.

In the light of these definitions I shall now proceed to examine each of Burton's theses in turn.

1. "The verbal community is an antecedent and a consequent determinant of verbal behaviour".

This thesis is true in the sense that members of a given verbal community in their capacity as speakers will emit verbal operants (sentences) which act as antecedents, either discriminative stimuli or, in some cases, aversive events, relative to the behaviour occasioned by them and the consequences of that behaviour. Moreover in their capacity as listeners, members of the verbal community will selectively reinforce either by obeying or failing to obey the speaker's mands or by emitting or withholding an expression of gratitude or assent in the case of the speaker's tacts. It is of course this selective reinforcement of the verbal behaviour of other speakers which ensures the uniformity in the use of words and sentence patterns from one speaker to another on which the mutual intelligibility of speech within the verbal community depends.

2. "The verbal community is a major difference between men and animals".

This is true in the sense that the existence of a verbal community is presupposed by the ability to emit and respond to verbal behaviour or language in the full sense in which the possession of verbal or linguistic skills is the unique prerogative of the human species.

3. "Self observation is a repertoire set up by the verbal community, so our awareness of our actions and of our private experiences is dependent on the verbal community. What is called "consciousness", then, is constructed by the verbal community".

This thesis seems to me to reflect a confusion between the two senses of the term 'consciousness' distinguished above, 'consciousness' in the sense of the central information processing and strategic decision making system which is revealed by self-observation or introspection and 'consciousness' in the Marxist sense in which it refers to the system of beliefs about how things are and ought to be that are shared by a particular social group or verbal community. When we draw this distinction, it becomes evident that whereas the system of beliefs which constitute Consciousness in the Marxist sense presupposes the prior existence of a verbal community within which those beliefs are held and within which they are communicated from one member of the community to another, the Verbal Community enters into Consciousness in the sense of central information processing system as revealed by introspection only in so far as the individual expresses his or her thoughts and perceptions in words.

Burton's claim that self-observation is repertoire set up by the verbal community is true in so far as any form of observation, and not just self-observation, consists in a behavioural chain which begins with selective attention to sensory input and concludes with the emission of an observation statement or in Skinner's terms, a tact under the control of a current stimulus, in other words a verbal description of what has been observed. Clearly the verbal community is involved both in the elicitation of such observation statements by means of the appropriate question (interrogative mand) and in their subsequent reinforcement. Moreover, as Wittgenstein points out in his 'private language argument' (Wittgenstein 1953, 242 ff), the language we use to communicate our private experiences is and, if it is to be understood by another person, necessarily must be, part of the public language, the meaning of whose words is fixed by the Verbal Community and anchored to the publicly observable features of the common environment shared by its members.

Likewise Burton's claim that thinking is set up and controlled by the Verbal Community is true in so far as human beings use self-directed verbal behaviour both in mediating their response to the current situation and in planning a future course of action. As I see it, there is no reason to suppose that there are not rudimentary methods of representing absent situations to oneself which need to be postulated in order to explain the remarkable problem-solving abilities of mammals in general and primates in particular. But given a reliable and flexible means of communication such as a language provides, information derived from the observations of other people can be added to that derived from one's own observations, thinking and behaviour controlled by thinking; with the result that thinking not only takes on a much more important role in the organism's adaptation to its environment because of the access which it gives to the accumulated experience of the verbal community over thousands of years, but its efficiency and reliability is substantially increased by virtue of the selective reinforcement by the Verbal Community of those habits of tact or indicative sentence emission (beliefs) which have proved reliable in the accumulated experience of its members. In other words it is the Verbal Community which, in Freud's (1922) terminology, by maintaining the Reality Principle as a corrective to the Pleasure Principle, prevents thinking from becoming autistic and hence, ineffective in the control of adaptive behaviour, as happens in the case of the thought-disordered psychotic.

Nevertheless to maintain without any qualification that Consciousness is constructed by the verbal community is to spoil a formidable case by overstating it. For whatever may be true of the practice of self-observation or introspection itself and however much the form and function of consciousness may have been modified and extended by the acquisition of linguistic skills and a system of verbally formulated concepts controlled by the Verbal Community, it is evident that Consciousness, in the sense that embraces the processes of selective attention, experience, categorizing and thinking as they are revealed to us through self-observation, is a part of the biological equipment for the processing of sensory information in our brains which we share with our 'dumb' primate ancestors and their and our surviving relatives today. Consciousness in this sense precedes and is something whose prior existence is presupposed by the subsequent development of language.

4. "Every person has a different verbal community, but classes of people, people with the same interests, and people working in the same industry, have verbal communities with sizeable common components."

There is an important distinction which needs to be drawn in connection with this thesis between what we may call the Verbal Community in the psychological sense, in which it consists of those other speakers whose own verbal behaviour and response to the verbal behaviour of the speaker in question effectively control, both by modelling and by selective reinforcement, that speaker's verbal behaviour, and the Verbal Community in the sociological sense in which it consists of the social group constituted by those individuals who directly or indirectly control one another's verbal behaviour in these ways and which in its broadest extent can be taken to include all native speakers of a particular natural language, such as English, who are not completely isolated from all verbal contact with other groups of speakers of the same natural language. It is of course, the verbal community in the psychological sense of which it is true that "every person has a different verbal community" in so far as every speaker responds to and has his or her own verbal behaviour selectively reinforced by a different selection of other speakers drawn from the Verbal Community in the

wider sociological sense. This distinction does not however, as Burton seems to think, help us with the problem that is presented by the kaleidoscopic pattern of overlapping sub-groups within the Verbal Community in the sociological sense whereby different social classes, different geographical regions and specialists in different trades and occupations have their distinctive dialects or codes which are more or less unintelligible to outsiders. These sub-groups can be treated for certain purposes as separate verbal communities, provided we recognise that a computer programmer is acting as a member of one verbal community when talking 'shop', as a member of another verbal community when talking football over his morning coffee and yet another verbal community when he goes home to his wife and kids in the evening, and yet that all these different verbal communities in so far as they involve the same natural language are no more than subdivisions within a single all-embracing verbal community constituted by all speakers of the same natural language throughout the world.

There is of course, a connection between the verbal community in what I am calling the psychological sense and the existence of this complex hierarchy of overlapping sub-groups within the wider verbal community in the sociological sense. In a complex industrial society the composition of the unique verbal community (in the psychological sense) which impinges on the individual speaker is largely determined by the unique set of sub-groups within the wider verbal community to which the individual belongs.

5. "We are members of our own verbal community, but in a special sort of way: we are always there and can be influenced by verbal behaviour that nobody else knows of".

That we are members of our own verbal community in what I am calling the psychological sense, which is what Burton presumably has in mind here, is partly true and partly false. It is true in so far as we engage in the activity which Skinner (1957 chapter 15) called "self-editing", whereby verbal responses are "examined for their effect upon the speaker or prospective listener, and then either rejected or released" (Skinner, 1957 p. 369), in other words, in so far as we monitor and correct our own verbal performances both prior to and at the time of emission.

On the other hand the function of self-editing, as Skinner himself points out, is to "augment and sharpen the effect upon the listener" (p. 369). In other words self-editing merely anticipates and is ultimately answerable to the control exercised by the Verbal Community over the verbal behaviour of the individual, the principal function of which is to maintain the standard conventions of syntax and word meaning required to ensure the intelligibility of what is said by one member for all other members of the same verbal community. However, these constraints designed to maintain standard conventions of syntax and word meaning only apply in so far as the speaker is communicating or preparing to communicate with others. Where, as in thinking, verbal behaviour is self-directed there is no danger that the thinker will misunderstand what he is saying to himself because the sentences he uses are incomplete or ambiguous or because he uses words in ways which do not conform to ordinary usage as accepted within the verbal community. Consequently, where verbal behaviour is self-directed, control by the verbal community is relaxed, autoclitics and the niceties of syntax go by the board, words are abbreviated or used in idiosyncratic ways and the thought may ultimately take on that apparently wordless and imageless character which so puzzled the introspective psychologists at the beginning of this century (Titchener, 1909; Humphrey, 1951) and more recently philosophers like Ryle (1958), as well as giving some initial plausibility to Fodor's (1975) concept of an innately programmed language of thought. Clearly, in so far as we do not have and do not need to conform to the standards imposed by the Verbal Community in our own communings with ourselves, to that extent and in that sense our own verbal community in the psychological sense is something internal to us, to which we do not ourselves belong and whose dictates we must obey only in so far as we need to communicate effectively with others. In the light of this I find it difficult to endorse Burton's claim that "we are always there" (i.e. in our own verbal community) "and can be influenced by verbal behaviour nobody else knows of" though I am far from clear what he means by this.

6. "The verbal community does not simply consist of an aggregate of individual speakers and hearers".

Clearly not; though this should not be taken as a licence to reify the Verbal Community, i.e. to treat it as a kind of individual or abstract object. Organised wholes are always greater than the sum of their parts in the sense that the whole has properties that a mere aggregation of its part, does not have; but there is also a sense in which the whole is nothing over and above its parts in that if the parts are removed, nothing is left.

7. "The Verbal Community is an historical product, as are classes and machines. It owes many of its characteristics to the means of production and reproduction. Not only do we have words, expressions and concepts that originate from human actions, that transform matter for human use, but we have developed productive processes that give rise to many aspects of the verbal community: newspapers, television etc."

Apart from noting that the sense of the term 'verbal community' required to make sense of this thesis is what I am calling the sociological rather than the psychological sense, I have no quarrel with this thesis. Indeed I would go rather further than Burton does in the direction of making the need to develop new concepts and a new vocabulary to describe and explain a new technology required to cope with a new environment, as *the* major factor leading to the development of verbal communities using codes unintelligible to the non-specialist and, ultimately, to the development of mutually unintelligible natural languages as is suggested by the Biblical legend of the Tower of Babel (Genesis XI, 1-9).

8. "Since the mass media influence the verbal community, and since people have unequal access to the mass media, the verbal community is unequally controlled by certain groups of people. Their verbal community strongly influences our verbal community".

What Burton presumably has in mind when he talks about unequal access to the mass media, is not the small proportion of people in this country who can't afford a newspaper or a T.V. licence or who still can't receive T.V. transmissions, but rather to the fact that not everybody's letter to 'The Times' gets printed, not everybody gets the opportunity to put their point of view in front of the T.V. camera and others get what might seem to some a disproportionate access to the media in this sense. This is true; but it is easy to exaggerate the extent to which individuals and special interest groups who control what is seen, heard or written or have their opinions purveyed on the mass media, are able to influence the vocabulary, syntax and belief systems which are endorsed by the relevant verbal community, and to underestimate the extent to which their verbal behaviour is in its turn determined and controlled by the wider verbal community whose vocabulary, syntax and belief systems they reflect.

9. "Since the verbal community determines the nature of our consciousness, that is the way we categorize and make guesses about ourselves and the world, and since the verbal community is unequally controlled by classes, it follows that our consciousness is determined, at least in part, by those classes who themselves originate historically from a division of labour in the means of production and reproduction. This is why cognition cannot be understood without reference to political economy, and why the verbal community is a link between psychology and sociology and political economy".

Here we have an argument. It has two premises:

1. The verbal community determines the nature of our consciousness.
2. The verbal community is unequally controlled by classes.

From these two premises three consecutive conclusions are derived.

A. Our consciousness is partly determined by social classes defined in terms of their relationship to the means of production.

B. Cognition cannot be understood without reference to political economy.

C. The verbal community is a link between psychology and sociology and political economy.

Now there are two things we need to consider when examining a deductive argument such as this. Firstly whether the premises are true, and secondly if they are true, whether the conclusion or, as in this case, conclusions follow from the premises.

The first premise "the verbal community determines our consciousness" harks back to thesis number 3. But whereas, as we have seen, thesis 3 confuses two distinct senses of the term 'consciousness' (a) consciousness as the central information processing system revealed by introspection and (b) 'consciousness' in the Marxist sense of a system of beliefs which the individual uses in making sense of his environment, it is clear from the clarificatory gloss on the term 'consciousness' in thesis 9 - "the way we categorize and make guesses about the world" - that here 'consciousness' is being used exclusively in what I am calling the Marxist sense. That being so, the statement that our consciousness or the nature of our consciousness is determined by the verbal community to which we belong becomes true analytically, i.e. solely by virtue of the definitions given about the terms 'consciousness' and 'verbal community'. This premise must therefore, be accepted as true.

The second premise - "the verbal community is unequally controlled by classes" - harks back to thesis number 8 in the same way that the first premise harks back to thesis number 3; but whereas the first premise asserts rather more decisively and succinctly what is stated in thesis 3, the second premise can be derived from thesis 8 only if thesis 8 is read through the distorting spectacles of Marxist paranoia, namely, that the groups of people who unequally control the mass media and hence the verbal community are members of certain, presumably capitalist, social classes and not others (i.e. the working class).

It is undoubtedly the case that in a capitalist society the mass media, particularly newspapers and television, are largely controlled by commercial interests. Nevertheless that control is severely constrained, as is all capitalist enterprise, by the preferences of the consumer who in the case of the mass media is predominantly working class. This reverse controlling influence of the proletariat on the organisation of society exercised by virtue of sheer weight of numbers is well illustrated in the case of the verbal community by comparing the upper class accents of the typical BBC announcer of the 1930s, and 1940s, with the mid-Atlantic regionally accented proletarian speech of today's disc-jockeys.

But while the influence of social class on the verbal community is neither as unidirectional or as malignant as Marxist paranoia makes it, the potency of the reciprocal influence of social class on the verbal community and of the verbal community on social class is so obvious, particularly in a country such as Britain, as to be undeniable.

However, given that with these qualifications, both of Burton's premises have to be accepted, do his conclusions follow from them? Burton, himself seems to be somewhat uncertain as to whether his first conclusion does follow strictly from his premises. For in stating his first conclusion to the effect that consciousness is controlled by social classes defined in terms of their relationship to the means of production, he inserts a qualification to the effect that our Consciousness is only "in part" so controlled. It seems to me however, that provided the premises are understood in the way I have suggested they should be, this qualification is quite unnecessary. Certainly if, as I have argued, it is true by definition that consciousness in the Marxist sense is controlled by the verbal community and if it is also true, as I agree it is, that the control exercised over verbal behaviour by the Verbal Community is exercised by and within social classes defined in terms of their relationship to the means of production, then it follows inescapably and without qualification that consciousness in this Marxist sense is controlled by and within social classes so-defined.

As to Burton's two further conclusions to the effect that "B. Cognition cannot be understood without reference to the verbal community" and "C. The Verbal community is the link between psychology and sociology and political economy", there is no way in which either of these propositions can be presented as following as valid deductive inferences from the premises of the argument as stated.

In order to yield conclusion B an additional premise – 'Cognition cannot be understood without reference to consciousness' - would be required; and this additional premise, so it seems to me, depends for its plausibility on exploiting the above-mentioned ambiguity in the term 'consciousness'. For it is

Consciousness in the sense of the central information processing system revealed by introspection rather than Consciousness in the sense of system of beliefs about the world to which any account of cognition must refer. No doubt no account of distinctively *human* cognition would be complete without some reference to the way in which human behaviour is controlled by a complex system of interlocking self-directed verbal operants, relating to virtually every significant aspect of human life; but the thesis as stated is about cognition in general not about human cognition in particular.

Conclusion C. "The Verbal Community is the link between psychology and sociology and political economy" on the other hand, is so remote from the initial premises and from the other two conclusions that it is difficult to suggest an additional premise from which this conclusion would follow when taken in conjunction with the other premises. Nevertheless as a summary of the direction in which the theses as a whole are pointing and as an evaluation of the significance of Skinner's concept of the verbal community for the disciplines in question and for the links between them, it seems to me entirely justified. I would likewise fully endorse Burton's final thesis:

10. "Conceived historically, the verbal community is the key to a theory of ideology",

and, I would add, to a great deal more besides.

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